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ABSTRACT

This informational flyer discusses the provision of educational services within general education classrooms to students with severe disabilities, including deaf-blindness. The legal basis for inclusion is reviewed, a rationale for full inclusion is offered, a working definition of full inclusion is provided, best practices and benefits of full inclusion are listed, and strategies involved in planning for full inclusion are discussed. (Contains 12 references.) (JDD)

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FOCUS FLYER

TOPIC: Full Inclusion for Learners with Severe Disabilities and Deaf-Blindness

-Jimmie Matthews-

The term *full inclusion* refers to the provision of educational services within general education classrooms to all students, regardless of type and degree of disability. This general education classroom should be located within the neighborhood school, and attended by peers without disabilities of the same chronological age (Stainback & Stainback, 1992; Giangreco & Putnam, 1991). The concept of full inclusion operationalizes the principle of LRE: provision of a free, appropriate education in the Least Restrictive Environment possible. A learner is denied general class placement only when, after provision of supplementary aids and services, the severity of the disability prevents any benefit from the program (Osborne & Dimatta, 1994). This means these learners are to be involved in all aspects of school life along with their peers who are without disabilities.

What Does the Law Say?

The principle of least restrictive environment was originally established with the passage of P.L. 94-142 in 1975, and later reaffirmed through passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990. Essentially, the mandate states that individuals with disabilities are to be educated in the same environment that would be appropriate had they not had disabilities. No court rulings have demanded that all learners with disabilities be educated in general education classrooms, but recent interpretations of the law have suggested several considerations regarding this placement option:

- Educational and non-academic benefits that a student will derive from placement in the general education classroom,
- Ability to grasp the general education curriculum,
- Nature and severity of the disability,
- Effects on learners without disabilities who are in the classroom,
- Overall experience in the mainstream, and,
- The amount of exposure to students without disabilities.

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The courts have also described several situations where services in a general education classroom may not prove to be the least restrictive environment for a learner with severe disabilities. This may occur when:

- The disability is so severe that little or no benefit from the general classroom will be realized;
- The learner is so disruptive that the education of others is compromised; or,
- The cost of necessary supplementary services is so excessive that other students are deprived of adequate services.

EC 304482

Why Full Inclusion?

Although full inclusion of learners with severe disabilities is not yet common in most school districts, a national trend toward greater integration has emerged. Supporters give several reasons why:

- In order for individuals with disabilities to eventually become members of an integrated, heterogeneous community life, they must grow up and learn together with individuals who are without disabilities. They need to experience a wide range of activities, people, environments, and ideas. It has been reported that inclusive settings provide opportunities to develop skills in problem solving, mobility, vocational, social, and communication skills.
- Learners without disabilities can learn to accept individuals who have diverse talents and challenges. One of the best ways to overcome misconceptions about individuals with disabilities is to interact with them.
- Some school districts have reported that it costs no more to educate learners with disabilities in general education classrooms than in segregated settings. When special education staff provide services in the general classroom, the entire class may benefit, resulting in a more cost effective use of resources.
- Inclusion promotes collaboration between general and special education staff, and can result in improved instruction for learners without disabilities.
- Some view inclusion as a civil rights issue; that is, in a democratic society, everyone has equal opportunities.

What Does Full Inclusion Actually Mean?

The California Research Institute has developed the following working definition of what full inclusion means:

- ✓ Attending a home school,
- ✓ Proceeding through elementary, junior high, and high school with same-age peers,
- ✓ Participating in general education classrooms with non-disabled peers,
- ✓ Receiving special education services from a collaborative team (general and special education teacher, related service personnel, paraprofessionals, parents, and administrators),
- ✓ Receiving specialized services (Braille, sign language instruction, physical therapy, etc.) as needed,
- ✓ Receiving planned, facilitative social network assistance with peers who are non-disabled, as well as with peers who provide a linguistic community (i.e. students whose primary language is sign language),
- ✓ Receiving opportunities for building family networks and social relationships with similar disabled peers, adult role models, and self advocacy/consumer advocacy groups, and,
- ✓ Zero exclusion: all students, regardless of disabilities, have the right to an education which is fully inclusive.

Full Inclusion does not mean:

- ✓ "Dumping" learners with disabilities into general education classrooms without support,
- ✓ Delivery of instruction for everyone in the same way,

- ✓ Termination of instruction in functional life skills,
- ✓ Exclusion from community-based instruction or vocational instruction,
- ✓ Elimination of same-disability support groups, or,
- ✓ Termination of facilitating social relationships and community building (Gee, Alwell, Graham, & Goetz, 1994).

What Are the Best Practices in Full Inclusion?

- Each learner is placed in an age-appropriate general education classroom that becomes the base of all services.
- Each learner's specific outcomes are addressed; no placements are made merely for the sake of meeting full inclusion criteria.
- Support teachers and other staff come to the learner's classroom.
- Learners receive the same amount of time and instructional assistance from their special education teacher as they would in a special education classroom.
- Individualized educational needs are met within the activities of the general education program.
- When an objective cannot be met within the general education program, other areas of the school and the community are used.
- Every effort is made to accommodate the unique learning characteristics of each learner.
- There is a merger of exemplary practices from both special and general education.
- Teachers work in collaborative teams to serve all learners in the best possible way.
- Related service professionals, itinerant teachers, and consultants collaborate with the general and special education teachers and paraprofessionals to ensure the instruction of particular skills (functional life skills, Braille or sign language, mobility, communication skills, etc.) within the learner's instructional day.
- Staff receives timely training in best practices.

What are the Benefits of Full Inclusion?

Typical children engaged in age-appropriate activities exhibit behavior that children with disabilities may try to emulate, resulting in increased motivation, higher expectations, and higher achievement. Home school placement encourages:

- \+ Participation in a variety of school activities appropriate for chronological age (recess, lunch, assemblies, music, art, clubs),
- \+ Development of new mutual friendships with nondisabled peers that may last beyond the school day,
- \+ Learning in natural contexts in the presence of natural cues, corrections, and reinforcements.

Some Potential Benefits for Learners Without Disabilities and Professional Staff:

- \+ Improvement in attitudes toward individuals with disabilities,

+ Development of appreciation and acceptance of individual differences,
+ Development of meaningful friendships without regard to the presence or absence of a disability, and,
+ Development of a greater understanding for all persons who have disabilities (Snell & Eichner, 1989).

Peck, Donaldson, and Pezzoli (1990) surveyed non-handicapped high school students concerning the benefits they perceived as a result of interaction with peers who had severe disabilities. In addition to the development of new friendships, they reported an improved self concept and an enhanced understanding of the feelings and beliefs underlying the behaviors of other people in general. They also reported reduced fear of human differences, increased tolerance for others who were different, and the development of positive personal principles.

Some Concerns About Full Inclusion

Discussion of this topic would not be complete without recognizing various concerns expressed by several prominent professionals in the field of special and general education. Most acknowledge that some learners with disabilities could participate in academic programs, but feel they could require so much time and attention from the teacher that the education of the other learners would be compromised. Some feel it is unacceptable to expose children with disabilities to the pressures of stringent assignments, time frames, grades, rigid standards, or competency testing unless they can succeed. Others are concerned that these learners could feel more socially isolated, interacting more frequently among themselves than with their peers. There is also concern that a merger of the general and special education systems could be harmful, particularly for those children who lack adequate support services. And, some believe there is not an adequate research base for advocating such drastic changes in the general and special education systems at this time (York, Vandercook, MacDonald, Heise-Neff, & Caughey, 1992).

What Is Involved in Planning for Full Inclusion?

The family should form the cornerstone of educational planning because they know their child better than anyone else. After all, they have a vested interest in seeing their child learn. Most likely, they will be involved with the child's educational program throughout life. The family must live all day, every day with the outcomes of decisions made by educators. Families must be allowed to participate in the planning process. Several suggestions for planning within the inclusive context follow:

- The learner's planning team should develop a list of educational priorities for annual goals, and develop a plan for their implementation. These goals should be based on specific needs and family-centered priorities, not on what is valued by professionals from the various disciplines. The educational priorities should be based on input from all team members.
- The contexts and activities should be based on an ecological inventory of all the environments in which the student will be expected to function, the general education teacher's class schedule, and other school or community contexts that will be accessed on a regular basis.
- An action plan should be developed that will include a detailed schedule of activities necessary for achieving each goal, an assignment of who will be responsible for each activity, and timelines for completion of the activities.
- A related service delivery plan must be developed in order to provide the learner with necessary support from other professionals and education staff.

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- Strategies for facilitating social interaction and peer support networks should be identified and carefully planned.

What Strategies Can Parents and Educators Use to Promote Full Inclusion?

- Organize an advocacy group.
- Become better informed in integrative issues.
- Inform others of the benefits and strategies associated with inclusion.
- Work to influence policies relating to inclusion.
- Work with the media.
- Meet frequently with influential school administrators.
- Influence others in the school system.
- Work within their advocacy organizations.
- Consult a legal advisor.
- Bring advocates to IEP conferences and placement staffings.
- Contact other parents and advocates (Hamre-Nietupski & Hendrickson, 1993, pp. 253).

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